

The sporting pope: How St John Paul II combined the two loves of his life

FAITH IN SPORT

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While Pope St Pius X showed that the Church approved sport, it was another 20th century papal saint, John Paul II, who realised the full evangelising potential of sport on which his successors have built.

Karol Józef Wojtyła was born on 18th May 1920 in Wadowice, Poland. His parents were Karol Wojtyła, a military officer, and Emilia Kaczorowska, who was a seamstress. He was the youngest of three children.

He was nine years old when his mother died in 1929. His father supported him so that he could study. His brother was a doctor who died when Wojtyła was 12. He lost everyone in his family – a sister, brother, mother, and father – before he became a priest.

He played a lot of sport and is quite well-known for his love of football, where he played goalkeeper.

Wojtyła and his friends would also play ice hockey when the Skawa river froze over during the winter. Besides playing with his friends, Wojtyła also enjoyed kicking the ball around with his father. A friend remembers entering the Wojtylas' apartment and finding father and son playing soccer with a ball made of rags.

His sporting prowess earned him two nicknames. While some called him the 'skiing pope', his time in goal left him with the nickname 'Lolek the Goalie'. Karol Wojtyła played in pick-up matches that pitted Jewish boys against Catholic boys, and Wojtyła would volunteer to play with the Jewish boys to create even numbers.

During his pontificate - from 1978 to 2005 - he published 34 pastoral statements on sport.

He often drew comparisons between sport and faith. Here are some of his favourites.

Virtues, realising the Gospel Values acquired through sport, are transferable to everyday life. "Playing sport has become very important today, since it can encourage young people to develop important values such as loyalty, perseverance, friendship, sharing and solidarity," he said.

Sport can help create peace. "Sport is a factor of emancipation for poor countries and helps to eradicate intolerance and build a more brotherly and united world."

Sport enhances diversity and inclusion. "Sport...protects the weak and excludes no-one...frees

The skiing pope: in black, adjusting gloves



young people from the snares of apathy and indifference and arouses a healthy sense of competition in them."

"Sports, in fact, can make an effective contribution to peaceful understanding between peoples and to establishing the new civilization of love."

Sport helps us realise life to the full (Jn.10:10) "Sports contribute to the love of life, teaches sacrifice, respect and responsibility, leading to the full development of every human person."

Sport generates lives that reveal the presence of The Kingdom of God. "Every Christian is called to become a strong athlete of Christ, that is, a faithful and courageous witness to his Gospel. But to succeed in this, he must persevere in prayer, be trained in virtue and follow the divine Master in everything."

Sport develops the whole of our PIES – the physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual constituent parts of our lives. "Sport trains body and spirit for perseverance, effort, courage, balance, sacrifice, honesty, friendship and collaboration."

Sport is a gift from God. "Give thanks to God for the gift of sport, in which the human person exercises his body, intellect and will, recognising these abilities as so many gifts of his Creator."

JP2 prayed: "Lord Jesus Christ, help these athletes to be your friends and witnesses to your love. Help them to put the same effort into personal asceticism that they do into sports; help them to achieve a harmonious and cohesive unity of body and soul."

"May they be sound models to

imitate for all who admire them. Help them always to be athletes of the spirit, to win your inestimable prize; an imperishable crown that lasts forever.

At its finest, sport is a great virtues gymnasium. "The correct practice of sport must be accompanied by practicing the virtues of temperance and sacrifice; frequently it also requires a good team spirit, respectful attitudes, the appreciation of the qualities of others, honesty in the game and humility to recognize one's own limitations. In short, sports, especially in less competitive forms, foster festive celebration and friendly co-existence with the Christian outlook, becomes a "generative principle" of profound human relations and encourages the building of a more serene and supportive world."

Sport can help us be more objective in the way we see the world. "In the midst of all this entertainment, you referees have a fundamental role to play. Your capacity to judge in a quick, accurate and impartial manner will contribute greatly to ensuring that the rules of the game are respected and that good sportsmanship is maintained."

"I hope, above all, that you approach this competition with that disciplined and focused attitude which helps to form every person and which can teach order, loyalty and respect for people and laws as well as being a training ground for building strength and dignified behaviour."

Sport is a means, not an end, on our journey through time to eternity. "It is important that you know how to witness to the

masses who follow your sporting abilities. As athletes, before being fit and skilled in responding quickly on the pitch, be men who seek after and conform to all that is good, true and excellent. Make sure that man is never sacrificed to sport!"

JP2 reminded us that sporting prowess does not negate our need for God's grace. "When facing fundamental questions about existence, even the greatest sporting champions find themselves defenceless and in need of God's light in order to overcome the difficult challenges that human beings are called to face."

Competitions, originating from the Latin word "competere," which means "to strive together," are 'ubuntu', helping all participants to develop their potential. "Athletic competition develops some of the noblest qualities and talents in people. They must learn the secret of their own bodies, their strengths and weaknesses, their struggles and breaking points. They must develop the capacity to concentrate and the habit of self-discipline through long hours of exercise and fatigue as they learn to take account of their own strength. They must also learn how to preserve energy for the final moment when victory will depend upon a burst of speed or a last push of strength."

Sport can help us develop our image and likeness to God. (Gen. 1: 26-7). "The Church cannot but encourage everything that serves in harmoniously developing the human body. It is rightly considered the masterpiece of the whole of creation, not only

because of its proportion, strength, and beauty, but also and especially because God has made it His dwelling place and the instrument of an immortal soul, breathing into it that "breath of life" by which man is made in His image and likeness."

Sporting enthusiasm needs to be rationally controlled. "The dignity of sport is increased when it is inspired by healthy principles and is void of excessive risky behaviour by athletes and the disturbing attitudes by some fans who get carried away during competition."

"Sport is an activity that involves more than the movement of the body; it demands the use of intelligence and the disciplining of the will. It reveals, in other words, the wonderful structure of the human person created by God as a spiritual being, a unity of body and spirit. If sport is reduced to the cult of the human body, forgetting the primacy of the spirit, or if it were to hinder your moral and intellectual development, or result in you serving less than noble aims, then it would lose its true significance and, in the long run, it would become even harmful to your healthy full growth as human persons.

"You are true athletes when you prepare yourselves not only by training your bodies but also by constantly engaging the spiritual dimensions of your person for a harmonious development of all your talents."

In 1979, Pope John Paul II addressed the Milan soccer team after they won the Italian Championship. He encouraged them to set a good example both on the field and off, saying,

"In a world in which we sometimes behold the painful presence of young people who are weary, marked by sadness and negative experiences, be for them wise friends, expert guides and trainers not only on sports fields but also on the ways that lead to the goals of the true values of life. In this way to the satisfactions of competitive sport you will add merits of a spiritual nature, offering society a valuable contribution of moral health."

He then concluded his talk by saying: "May the Lord Jesus grant you that 'goal,' that is, that final target, which is the true and ultimate destiny of life."

As we have experienced – and read about in my previous piece – Pope Francis has built on the foundations laid by Pope St John Paul 2. I hope his successor continues that great work.